

THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY 1821-1860's



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Women scraping moose hide

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TOTAL MONOPOLY

With the merger of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company in 1821, the Hudson's Bay Company enjoyed a complete monopoly in Rupertsland and the Northwest. Also with the monopoly, they fired all the Metis who participated in the old Northwest Company.¹ Thus, the first Metis unemployment was created. So the Metis took up other ways of making a living, such as hunting and trapping for themselves instead of the fur company. Also, they became labourers who traveled the river systems, known as voyageurs, taking buffalo meat and pemmican up north and bringing back the furs and raw materials.

RESULTS OF THE MONOPOLY

The Hudson's Bay Company, being the only fur trading and provision selling posts in the Northwest and Rupertsland, soon jacked prices of goods up high and gave very low prices for the furs. In this way they enjoyed huge profits.

The profits enjoyed averaged about ten-fold. They bought the furs for very little and sold them to the European nations for as much as ten times what they paid for them in the first place. Goods that were sold, or bartered for, were sold at the rate of five to six times more than they were worth.

PRIVATE ENTERPRISES

Not all this profit went to the Hudson's Bay Company, for there were always enterprising individuals running the posts. These individuals were called factors.

They had two ways of making profits for themselves. One was to give an even lower value on the furs of the Metis or Indians. This made the purchasing power for receiving goods all the lower.

Another way was to just jack up the prices of the goods and provisions. Either way was very effective in making a fast dollar. The only problem that resulted from this method was that if the factor did not take out his profit of furs when he sent them on to the main post then the books did not balance with the quantity of furs received. As a consequence, the factor was soon replaced.

An Indian always paid the price for anything he purchased. To buy a rifle, the Indian would be required to pile beaver pelts on the floor until they reached the same height as a rifle that was standing on it's butt. Sometimes it would take twelve to thirteen pelts to buy a rifle. In turn, the Company factor would send one pelt to Europe and receive in return a dozen rifles.

These tactics forced the Indian trappers and hunters to get the Metis to exchange their furs for them because the Metis could get a better price for them.

Yessiree, the Hudson's Bay Company stockholders were going to be very rich men indeed...maybe.

DISCONTENT

With the way the fur trade was going there was bound to be discontent in the ranks of the Metis and Indians.

In the early 1830's, Metis started trading with U.S. trading posts because they could get better prices for their furs. When the Hudson's Bay Company

heard of this, they imposed an almost impossibly high tariff on goods coming into the Red River.

"Thus the so-called free traders, whose carts and herds had begun to raise dust in the rutted tracks along the Minnesota River, became outright smugglers."²

As the years went by the restrictions of this tariff were stiffened. Men were being arrested and imprisoned, and their furs seized. The trips from St. Paul to the Red River were watched very closely. The demands for free trade by the Metis were doubled and the resistance against the Hudson's Bay Company increased.

BREAKING OF A MONOPOLY

In 1849, the Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company in the Red River district, arrested three Metis smugglers. Another so-called smuggler, Guillaume Sayer, was also arrested. The Factor was intent on using them as examples, in an open court. His plan backfired.

Louis Riel Sr., a respected and notable figure in the Red River, believed in the free trade movement. He led approximately 100 angry Metis and encircled the courthouse and packed the courtroom. Riel then announced that the jury should take no longer than one hour to hear the pleas and render a verdict.

The first man, Guillaume Sayer, admitted his guilt. The jury found him guilty but recommended no penalty; the other cases were dismissed. A precedent had been set. The monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company was no more.

"The Metis broke up with jubilant shouts of 'Le commerce est libre!' And so it was."³



Women making a birch bark canoe

RESULTS

The Hudson's Bay Company no longer attempted to enforce its monopoly and the Council of Assiniboia, the local government of the Red River, realized the Metis were prepared to stand up for their rights.

Another result of the breaking of the monopoly was that the Metis were given a greater voice in the governing of the Red River. They achieved this by electing Father Lafleche to the Council.⁴

There was a reign of general prosperity in the Red River after the monopoly was broken. The free trade movement was indeed in the best interest of the people.

BUFFALO MEAT

Along with free trade went some drastic consequences also. One being the extermination of the buffalo.

The buffalo had been the chief source of food for the Plains Indians for centuries and roamed the prairies in the millions. They used the buffalo for food, shelter and clothing.

But with the free trade came the American traders, who considered the buffalo an important trade item. They wanted the buffalo hides to make leather, from which strong belts were produced to run machinery in factories. They were also interested in the buffalo tallow. The American traders encouraged massive buffalo hunts in which the animals were shot, skinned, and the meat was left to rot.

The increasing slaughter of the buffalo affected both the Indians and the Metis. The Plains Indians faced hardship as the buffalo was their main source

of food. But the Metis, familiar with European culture, took up agriculture and devoted more time to farming. Other Metis found different types of employment or moved further west or north to continue hunting and fishing for a living.

THE MILITARY BUFFALO HUNT

The Metis, when hunting the buffalo, did so in a military way. The first Metis buffalo hunts were led by Cuthbert Grant, and later by Gabriel Dumont.

Small parties of Metis would leave their settlements and meet at a given spot on the plains. When all were assembled there, the chief and officers were elected. Also captains and guides were selected. The captains and officers were to see that the laws were observed by all.

Following are a few *Laws of The Buffalo Hunt*.⁵

- 1) No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath day.
- 2) No party to fork off, lag behind, or go before without permission.
- 3) No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.
- 4) Every captain, with his men, in turn to patrol the camp, and keep guard.
- 5) For the first trespass against these laws, the offender to have his saddle and bridle cut up.
- 6) For the second offence, the coat to be taken off the offender's back and be cut up.
- 7) For the third offence, the offender to be flogged.
- 8) Any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier to call out his or her name three times, adding the word 'thief' at each time.

Honesty was proverbial among the halfbreeds of the plains, and the final punishment (no. 8) was the worst form in which it could be administered, as the disgrace of being a thief was taken much to heart by the very worst of them.

1850-1868

During these years, the labourers and voyageurs staged many strikes concerning wages, living conditions, and having a day off from work. They almost always got what they wanted. They had to work hard to maintain their rights. There was always the threat of the Company trying again to take away their rights.

The next major event that would have an effect on the Metis of the Red River would be the 1869-70 uprising. The reason for this one being that the Metis and the people of the Red river were not consulted in the negotiations of the transfer of Rupertsland. The Hudson's Bay Company knew that the fur trade was not like it used to be...nor would it ever be again.

FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Tremaudan. pg 81-82
2. The Red River Trails. Rhoda R. Gilman, Carolyn Gilman and Deborah M. Stutz. pg 8.
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